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At least 1,000 Illinois National Guard soldiers in Iraq will get to make a free telephone call home on Father's Day thanks to a local initiative.

Republican U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk of Highland Park is trying to collect as many prepaid phone cards as possible for the troops before Tuesday evening.

He will have the cards shipped via Federal Express to Iraq, where Army Guard Maj. Jerry Clark will distribute them.

Kirk, a Naval Reserve officer and combat veteran, said he hatched the phone card collection idea after he recently was on weekend duty.

He said his reserve colleagues told him it's not always easy to access the free U.S. military wireless telephones to call home from Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East.

Soldiers who use landline phones can pay at least \$1 per minute for calls to the United States from some areas in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Kirk said the price can make troops think twice before phoning home.

Kirk said about 1,000 prepaid phone cards either have been donated already or are on the way.

About 200 of the cards will be collected Monday from students at Highcrest Middle School in Wilmette. The rest of the cards have been contributed by AT&T, SBC Communications Inc. and

the congressman's office.

Kirk has launched other initiatives for troops in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2003.

In December, Kirk headed an effort to give cards and letters to soldiers and delivered the correspondence himself.

Stevenson High School singers, local church choirs, Kirk and others also teamed up to record the "Voices From Home" holiday CD for troops in December 2003.

Phone cards must be collected by Kirk's office by 5 p.m. Tuesday. Cards may be dropped off at 102 Wilmot Road, Suite 200, Deerfield. Kirk's local office can be reached at (847) 940-0202.

Kirk said Illinois soldiers will have priority for the prepaid phone cards. He said soldiers from other states could receive them if there are extras.